

Beast Master 1021

Chapter 1021: Meeting With Niall

A few seconds passed in silence as everyone digested that new information, then Niall smiled.

"Where is my favourite spider? I would assume that since her bonded partner has reached Totem Rank, she has as well." The Inquisitor asked.

Karl nodded. "Indeed she has, though just last night. She's still sleeping off the advancement, but we thought it would be better for everyone if we left the potions and recipes on your desk instead of going to see Ahmad himself."

Niall chuckled. "He's been moved to the Imperial Palace, and that's protected better than anywhere else on the continent from portals and teleportation type skills. He's good friends with the new King, and has been for some time. But he was actually moved closer so that they could brainstorm ways to change the nation."

That had everyone's attention.

"You see, Ahmad has the idea that if we can properly mobilize all these new awakenings from the last two intakes, we can completely overhaul the nation's production facilities. Advanced technology combined with magic has already proven to be every bit as effective as the traditionally made magical items.

At least, in some ways.

Explosive rounds for artillery have proven to be highly inefficient, using more mana than just putting the mage in a helicopter and letting them bombard the battlefield. Same with magical bullets for guns.

The overall effect of that one was pretty good, but in practice, it's better to just let the mages do mage stuff. Plus, magical barriers make the bullets essentially useless anyhow. So, there's no need for both at the same time.

But what really took off was the new bulldozers. Some mage got the great idea to enchant the blade with Earth Magic, and it made clearing solid stone with heavy equipment as efficient as moving clay.

The first construction projects it was put on are months ahead of schedule."

Karl chuckled and Dana winked at the assassin before explaining.

"Here, the Demons use Earth and Fire magic to make entire cities. The Dwarves use Earth Magic to carve out whole mountains, and they can make a skyscraper in a matter of days, not months or years.

It's absolutely brilliant, as long as you don't think too deeply about the engineering behind it." She explained.

Niall nodded in understanding. "Yes, I suppose that just letting people make an entire building out of what looks like a single concrete pour with no reinforcement would be very concerning to anyone who knows more about structural engineering than Earth Magic."

Karl realized they had completely missed the important parts of their concerns.

"How are things with the Giants?" He asked.

Niall shrugged. "Not bad. They retreated after the last major battle, and they're back within their own borders.

Once they realized that the full push on the Capital had failed, and that their infiltrators had all been flushed out, they gave up on the war plans.

Of course, part of that was the death of their new leader, and the need for the Mountain Giants to elect a new Chieftain. But the war is officially over, and we're back to nothing more than tense relations with everyone else.

There have been a few more Dungeon spawns as well, and that's not helping anyone's nerves.

The stabilized Dungeons have proven to be not only the fastest way for Elites to advance, but an incredible source of loot and raw materials for the continent. Fortunately, it's all been Commander Rank and lower instances opening, so we haven't had a power race in one particular area, but the Golden Dragon Nation now has three Commander Rank Dungeons and one Awakened.

Ironically, the Awakened Rank Dungeon opened fifty metres from the walls of the Academy.

Can you imagine that? All these newbie Elites from the latest intakes training, and they've got a Dungeon right there waiting for them after their first advancement.

Even better, anyone from Commander or weaker Ranks can enter it once a week, and it's set up for a twenty-person attempt.

It's perfect for team building exercises, and the groups are large enough that multiple classes can pick groups of two or three to go and work with random teams from other specialties.

Lieutenant Rita, Karl's old advisor, has been put in charge of the schedule for the Dungeon, as those who don't get picked to go from their class work can sign up for a pickup group instead. She's excelled in the role, and the classes that she teaches on cooperative combat are a student favourite."

That was all good news to Karl, but everyone else had strange looks.

"Did you say the last two intakes?" Tessa asked.

Niall nodded. "The intake ceremony was two weeks ago. The second since we've had the new methods of awakening Elites.

This one was just as successful as the last one, with over a third of the entire population of basic school graduates gaining the Warrior Class. I don't know what we're supposed to do with such an imbalance of warriors, but there is an incredible influx of mages as well."

The Red Dragon Cleric began counting on her fingers and frowning more deeply.

"The math just doesn't add up." She muttered.

Niall shrugged. "I have heard there are strange things on this continent, and a bit of time distortion in random areas wouldn't be the strangest thing that I have ever heard of. So, you might not have experienced the whole flow of time."

Karl smirked and poked Dana. "We almost missed your eighteenth birthday. We should find out what today's exact date is and make a cake."

Niall lifted his wristwatch, then frowned at it.

"That's the weirdest thing I have ever seen." He muttered.

The watch was a quality mechanical watch in a protective leather case. But while it had displays for the day and month, they were blurry, impossible to read.

"Well, now we know how to determine if we're in an area with a time anomaly. We just need to buy a watch." Karl joked.

But for Remi, there was a more urgent concern. She had potions for the new Academy students, and they were supposed to have been delivered before the year started, as a surprise.

{Take these with you as well. They're all for the Academy.}

Niall laughed as she stacked crates of small vials, then placed them in his office.

"Hopefully, the open portal is keeping this area in sync with home, or someone will be very mad at me for slacking on my work." He sighed.

"In that case, we will see you again soon. Rae will want to visit you and her baby Rogue once she's stabilized."

Chapter 1022: Power Matrix

Niall chuckled and got to his feet. "Thank you for breakfast and the gifts for your countrymen. I can't say that I've ever heard of exiles finding a way to still help out after they were sent away, but I appreciate it."

Karl patted him on the shoulder. "I would volunteer to come back and help keep everyone in line, but it sounds like you have it all under control."

The Inquisitor smirked. "You think now that you're a Totem that you can flex on the other nations' leadership?"

Karl winked at him and leaned in to whisper conspiratorially. "I was rewarded with a special Epic Grade constitution. At this point, I can reliably solo a Totem Ranked Dungeon Boss, without bringing my beasts to assist.

If you have a problem with the others, let me know. Even five on one, it's unlikely that they can do significant damage to me, and I've got so much damage reduction that even a direct meteor strike wouldn't do it."

Niall shook his head in dismay. "You live up to your reputation, monster man. Warn me before you send Rae so that I can shield my quarters and not alert anyone that she has arrived."

Then he turned and returned to his office, so Karl could close the portal.

"We never did find out what the exact date was." Dana noted a few seconds after he was gone.

"Well, we can sort that later. Once Rae wakes up, we can get back to our hunting patrols. If we can't pin down the exact date, then we can just pick one to celebrate." Karl suggested.

Now that the excitement was over, Remi returned to her lab to work, and Hawk went outside to take a loop around the area, looking for threats.

Rae was going to need all day to recover, and she would likely only wake up once the sun was down again. That was her natural active time, and each of the advancements was a bit harder to recover from.

They took a lot out of the spider, even though it was an advancement.

"Can we expect the others to advance soon?" Lotus asked, meaning the rest of the beasts.

"Thor still has a ways to go until he reaches the bottleneck, but he also advanced last, so he's still on pace. Remi has a bit more work to do as well, but Cara is close.

She just prioritizes amusement to power growth, so you never know when she's actually going to advance." Karl joked.

Cara shrugged. She was powerful enough for what she wanted to do. When she wasn't, she would advance.

That was just how it worked.

A soft mental nudge caught Karl's attention. "Oh, I think the Butterfly is almost ready to advance as well. Perhaps once she reaches Totem Rank, she will be stabilized enough that she can come out and socialize."

Karl felt the mental nod, and that she was learning from Rae, and planned to make a grand entrance to introduce herself to the rest of the group properly.

They were all aware of her work, and she had interacted with them in her dreamlike state, but it would be the first time that she got to meet them all in person. That was a big thing, even bigger than just an advancement, so she had to make it grand.

With nothing important to do, everyone settled into their daily tasks.

The three Priestesses spent most of the day in prayers, Ophelia and Thor went to spar, while Dana mediated to improve her mana pool and the stability of her new advancement.

Karl did the same, but he had another goal.

One of his class skills improved his Soul Power based on his Power Matrix. He currently had it at nine points, and that had been excellent for his progression, but he had a solid vision for the twenty-seven point formation.

In theory, that should triple his growth rate, and the amount of mana that he could transfer to the beast spaces, up to his personal limit.

So, keeping the focus on Supreme Lady Matilda, whose image he had used for the nine point formation, Karl began focusing on filling in the extra spaces and rearranging the focal points into a much larger matrix.

While he worked, he couldn't move any mana at all to the beasts. But the whole process only took a few hours of intense concentration, and left him with a pounding headache that faded after a few minutes.

Then, Karl gently began to flow mana through the new formation, checking for imperfections before everything settled into a permanent position that he would have to destroy to alter.

He didn't find any bottlenecks or instabilities as he pulled mana through to his limits. So, he focused on the Blade of Champions and the life energy that it had stored. The Haint had absorbed almost all that it had stored when it awakened, so he let it keep what little soul energy it had left.

He had enough work to do just with the Blade of Champions and the beast spaces.

Working on advancing them was his highest priority, as only the two were actually at the Totem Rank. The rest were close, but not quite past the breaking point yet.

That would change tonight.

The spaces were improving much more rapidly than Karl had expected, now that his level wasn't a limiter on their advancement.

Something outside would surely notice the mana imbalance from the amount that he was pulling, but Karl was careful not to mess with the mana balance inside the Tiny World so that it didn't interfere with the others' work.

That was another thing that Karl realized he should work on later. He was much more powerful than he had been when he formed the Tiny World. If he wanted to, he could greatly increase the limits of the space.

However, there was plenty of room, even for dragons who wished to fly around and relax.

So, Karl focused on a different project.

He created a massive crystal near the Guild House, in an unused hilly section that Thor and Ophelia had deemed unsuitable for practice. As he formed it, Karl coated the entire thing in mana storage runes.

He could use it as a massive mana battery, like the Lich Lords had done with the crystal in their wagon.

Twenty tonnes of Totem Ranked Runic stone would be able to slowly collect an absolutely enormous amount of mana. That should be enough to power not only the space, but all the practice that was done inside and the training of the others.

Flooding the body with higher Rank mana was an effective method of pushing toward an advancement, and once this was full, everyone else should be able to drag themselves toward Overlord.

It might not be the most effective way to pull lower level companions toward the highest group member's standard, but it was hundreds of times better than just letting them fumble along on their own.

In a way, it was like having a mentor, as the Spellblade Clans did.

Someone who could teach you and help your growth progress smoothly. Only, it wasn't limited to just one Class, but to members of the Darklight Host and others that Karl trusted enough to bring into this space.

Perhaps he should put some protective Runes on the crystal, or the platform it was sitting on, to prevent theft attempts or misuse if someone broke in.

Chapter 1023: Grand Reveal

Rae woke up after midnight that night, and flexed her limbs to make sure everything was working as intended after that odd moulting incident.

It made sense, with the crab blood that she had used, but it was a new experience for Rae, who normally just grew and reshaped herself a little. It wasn't bad, though. She felt brand new and refreshed, ready to face the world in a whole new Totem Ranked body.

[Did you want to do your reveal first or second, little sister?] Rae asked as the sun began to come up in the Tiny World.

The butterfly thought about it. [Together. I will set the stage, and we can make a grand entrance.]

Rae waited while her little sister made the final plans.

Everyone was awake now, and getting into the showers. So, that was the perfect moment to set up their entrance.

Four ranks of illusionary spiders flanking either side of the walkway to the house, with a light fog around ground level to let Rae camouflage herself more effectively until she was ready for her grand reveal.

Then butterflies and sparkles in the air above them, where she would be hovering and waiting for Rae to appear and get her praise, so she could swoop down for the fireworks and then introduce herself to the group.

Rae tried not to laugh as she saw the Royal Procession that had been prepared for her, with all the illusionary spiders bowing before her.

Remi and Thor dragged the group out into the yard to watch, and Lotus was practically vibrating with excitement as she realized that Rae was going to make a dramatic entrance.

Rae started off invisible, then blended herself with the fog as she approached. Slowly, she adapted back to her natural black and red, as if she was emerging from the fog as she slowly strutted down the path.

Whistles and cheers greeted her approach, and Lotus ran up to hug her while the others laughed.

"Congratulations, Rae. Excellent work on making it to Totem Rank." Karl congratulated her, while fireworks began to explode overhead in the morning twilight.

Then the butterfly appeared.

Not as an illusion, but actually outside of her space for the first time since she evolved.

"Good morning, Sister Butterfly." Karl greeted her.

{You may call me Opal. I like that name. It is a pleasure to meet everyone.} She replied.

She fluttered down, her metre wide transparent wings reflecting the sunlight, and creating shimmering rainbows on the ground, along with the sparkles of shed mana as she moved.

That was an unavoidable side effect of her species, but now that she was powerful enough, she could recover far more than was needed to sustain the loss, and she could limit the spread of the mana particles to nearly nothing. Some loss was unavoidable, but the stronger she got, the better she was at controlling it.

It was strange being outside, not as much mana, and all sorts of new scents and auras.

But she got to actually touch people.

That was surprisingly fun.

"So, you can finally join us on adventures, Opal?" Tessa asked.

{Only a little bit. I will be a Totem soon, and then I'll be able to stay outside all the time if I want. But it's more comfortable to stay home and let the illusions do it.

[Illusionary Domain] is my world, and being outside of it just feels weird, even if I do get to meet new people and see new things.} Opal explained.

That was understandable. Her illusionary world was so realistic, with illusionary people, plants and buildings in it, that there wasn't much reason for her to ever leave home. She was essentially a city lord for a city of her own creation, with hundreds of subjects under her control.

A gentle ringing, like a doorbell, filled the Tiny World, and then a portal opened next to Karl.

That should not be possible, Karl knew.

Opening a portal into a separate space required knowing exactly where it was, not just the opening, but the actual nature of the space, and how it was formed.

But when an extremely annoyed looking Totem Ranked Vampire stepped through, nobody was startled anymore.

"Miss Tiffani, good morning to you and your Mistress. What brings you here so early?" Karl asked.

The Vampire examined him carefully, trying to determine what this strange man had done to himself since they met last.

"How did you make yourself an Elite Creature? That role should be reserved for dungeon bosses." She demanded, skipping the formalities.

"It's a pleasure to see you again as well. But really, I don't know. I went into a Trial Instance, and it gave me the option to optimize myself. I chose that option over the others, and then completed the trial, and it gave me a fancy thing for my name.

I can't see it, but nobody else seemed to know what it meant." Karl explained.

Dana cleared her throat, drawing Tiffani's attention. "What actually brought you here today? I suspect that if you forget the important part, it might become a problem for all of us."

"Right. The Supreme Lady wants me to take a picture with the spider and the badger." The Vampire explained.

She was obviously not happy about it, but that could be the fact that she had been chased out of bed at dawn. For a Vampire, this was just past their natural bedtime. Not that one as old as her would have any trouble being awake all day, but even the naturally cheerful Mick was cranky when it was too bright outside.

Plus, those born as Vampires from infected parents died the first time, the nature of their powers changed, and they became much more nocturnal.

Cara was happy to take a group photo, even if the camera was a relic, and she couldn't be certain of the quality of output they were going to get.

Karl set up the camera to catch the group, and Opal moved to hover behind the trio, while Cara stood up on her hind legs, so her face was closer to Tiffani's head height. Rae still dwarfed both of them in her natural form, though she was only a little taller than Tiffani. Just much wider.

There was only one button on the large tripod mounted camera. Karl had no problems getting it lined up for the shot, and then channelled mana into the button as he activated the magical device.

Unexpectedly, the camera did not output a photo. Instead, a metre wide, landscape oriented painting formed against the legs of the tripod, as if they were a painter's easel.

"Thank you. That will make her happy. She's been annoying me to get a picture of the Chaos Badger for ages, and now that there is a Totem Ranked child of the Spider Goddess in the Guild, she had to be the first to record it."

Rae snorted in amusement and transformed into a humanoid. "Does that mean we should expect a visitor from the Spider Goddess soon?"

Tiffani nodded. "Likely a whole group of them to test you and the Karl. Though, he's already fought off a whole group of assassins from Nerud, so they might be more polite the second time."

Chapter 1024: Opal Is A Homebody

Now that the picture was done, Tiffani collected the camera and gently picked up the magical painting.

"As much as I enjoy your company, I have much to do today. Thank you for your time." She announced.

Once she was gone, Rae began to laugh.

"She really does hold a grudge, doesn't she? That vampire hates you with a burning passion."

Karl shrugged. "Not my fault that things turned out the way that they did. Neither of us knew that things were going to end up with a trip to the Chaos Realm and a visit from the Supreme Lady when the fight started, and I certainly had no idea about her past with Matilda."

Rae shrugged, and all the others looked at him like he was an idiot.

"It doesn't matter that it wasn't my intention, does it?" Karl eventually realized.

"Not even a little bit. The fact is that you're the only other one involved, so you're the only other one to blame." Tessa agreed.

Ophelia shrugged. "She does look healthy, though, doesn't she? I don't think that the dragon is treating her too badly. If she were, I would have expected her to start looking worn down and tired after a few months."

Without warning, Opal vanished back into her space, but left an illusionary copy of herself as a stand in so that she could give the appearance of continued direct interaction with the world.

At first, she had stayed in her space for safety and out of necessity. But now that she had seen the outside, she realized that she was actually more comfortable at home.

Plus, being awake was exhausting. Not in a sense of mana deprivation, she had that under control. No, she was used to sleeping all the time, and never really got mentally stressed. But being awake was totally different.

And totally overrated.

"Are we throwing a party?" Lotus asked hopefully.

Rae had just revealed her advancement to Totem Rank, that was definitely worthy of a party, even if they hadn't just officially met Opal in person.

That was when Lotus realized that the butterfly floating overhead was an illusion. She hadn't even noticed when the real one vanished, the transition was that smooth. That skill would be incredible in an infiltration situation, where they needed to send an actual person. But, it was most likely because she could retreat to her space without using a spell.

Rae picked Lotus up and carried her back inside. "We're going to make special snacks for today. I hope that your new food creation spells are up to it."

"Oh, what did you have in mind?" Lotus asked.

Rae had said the magic word: 'Snacks'.

"I am thinking that we need cake because it's a celebration, but I'm thinking that instead of the sweet jam that you usually put in pastries, what if we made strudel with rhubarb and green apples? Then topped it with whipped cream."

Lotus frowned. Would that be good? Maybe it could be.

Over the next three hours, Lotus and Rae made a dozen different variations on sour and savoury versions of pastries, including some pulled pork steamed buns that turned out really well.

Hawk was really looking forward to those. They were visually the same as sweets, but with meat in them.

He hadn't realized yet that they weren't sweet in any way, just a convenient way of eating pulled pork on the move. But it was a new recipe for Rae and Lotus.

Now that she was awake, Opal found that she easily got bored, so she ended up creating illusions to do all sorts of things around the Tiny World. Some helped Rae and Lotus cook, some tidied the house, and when that wasn't enough distraction, she prepared an outdoor amphitheatre to put on a play.

The latest episode of 'The Noble Knight Thor and his companions' was a huge hit with the group, who generously overlooked the parts where she heavily embellished reality to make it more interesting.

After all, they couldn't very well have scenes where the hero of the story was simply standing on the sidelines or clearing out trash mobs while others did the real work. There was no harm in adding in a few more impressive enemies to the story.

"You've got yourself a reliable cheerleader." Dana joked as they finished the show.

Thor nodded happily. Sister Opal had done a wonderful job with the production of the latest episode of his memoir. He was greatly looking forward to the next one.

Rae lounged back on one of the stone benches of the illusionary theatre and popped a pastry in her mouth. Sweet and sour pastries were a great idea.

It was a good thing that they made hundreds of these today because she was adding them to the usual snack rotation.

But now that they had celebrated her advancement and watched a movie, she was getting curious about what might be hiding out in the wilderness around them. She was a Totem Ranked predator now, and there shouldn't be many things that she couldn't hunt.

But maybe there was?

Just the chance that there was still something around that might manage to escape from her or put up a real fight was exhilarating. So, as everyone settled in for another night of meditation or rest, she snuck out of the Tiny World and got the Naga bodyguards to update her on the situation outside.

There wasn't much coming close to them there, but there were some powerful monsters in the distance that Rae might be able to play with. They couldn't tell what it was, but they could sense the powerful auras.

Rae activated [Night Hunter] and went to see what she could find.

Her new body was incredibly powerful, and Rae found that she could run nearly as fast as Nachtia could fly. Faster than even the buses of the Golden Dragon Nation.

It was an incredible feeling, and in mere minutes, she had found the dangerous creatures that the Naga had sensed, but they weren't prey.

Just Orcs.

But the Orcs weren't a total loss.

"Hey, I'm bored. Anyone want a brawl to first blood? I will wager two bags of rice that I win." She shouted from the edge of their camp in humanoid form.

Chapter 1025: Good Trades

When everyone else woke up for the morning, Rae was in a wonderful mood.

Not only did she get her fight, she also managed to get a good trade out of the Orcs. After she won a flute carved from monster bones in the first fight, and an antler handled dagger in the second, she managed to trade the Orcs the rice she brought as a wager for a necklace made of Sand Mouse skulls.

She was currently wearing it to annoy Hawk.

To him, mice were nothing more than food. But Rae found that the small skulls made wonderful accessories. The Orcs even gave them war paint and stuck shiny stones in the eye sockets.

"Did you get your power level stabilized?" Karl asked as Rae sat down with them at breakfast.

Rae nodded. "Yeah, I went to stretch my legs a little last night. There is a group of Orcs not too far away, and they agreed to spar with me. That's where I got my new necklace."

"How big is the tribe? Should we go offer them a trade?" Tessa asked.

Rae shook her head. "There are only like twenty of them, with two Totems. It's more of a hunting group than a full clan. I traded them two bags of rice for the necklace after the sparring match, and that will last them for weeks."

Tessa nodded. "Did you remember to ask them about monsters in the area?"

Rae smirked. "What do you take me for? Of course, I did. I even drew a map of all the spots that they found good fights and tasty things. Karl isn't the only one that is good at talking to Orcs."

The War Cleric examined the map, then passed it to Karl and Thor, who would be the only ones outside as they travelled.

Hawk went to scout, and Rae activated [Night Hunter] and transformed into her natural form before taking a seat in the cargo area at the back of the wagon. That way, she could watch the scenery pass in comfort.

If there was something dangerous enough that they could sense her, they should be dissuaded from attacking by the fact that both her and Karl were outside the Tiny World.

"Where are we headed?" Lotus asked from the window of the carriage as Thor began to move.

"Hawk found a whole group of Sand Howlers from a monster spawn. I thought we should start the day off by eliminating the truly dangerous creatures.

They have a few Totems with them, but the group is mostly Overlords.

A bit over level, but I have a theory that this is actually the fastest way to push everyone to advance." Karl informed her.

Lotus retreated into the carriage, and Thor trotted happily across the hard grass.

The monsters were confirmed to be from a spawn, so he just had to head in their direction and they would attack. That gave him plenty of time to prepare, as Hawk already knew where they were.

Nothing had really changed with his tactics, but Thor had some new ideas on how to look epic while they were in battle.

After all, what was the point of being a behemoth if you couldn't look impressive?

Karl tried not to laugh at Thor's plans, which mostly revolved around ending charges and defensive manoeuvres with impressive poses without putting himself out of position for the next move.

"Five hundred metres. Everyone, get ready." Karl called into the carriage as Thor slowed to a stop so he could put the wagon away before the battle.

The ladies piled out of the carriage, and Rae made preparations for the battle.

With her pair of Golems out, and then the [Undead Army] of Spectral Knights, she had a full force ready. She was still incorporeal, but the summoned force would be enough to terrify the Sand Howlers.

Karl advanced on the Sand Howlers while Rae led her group to flank the right side.

That put everyone else on the left, as the few Totems in the swarm moved to engage what looked like the largest threat. Rae's summoned team.

Once they got close, Karl called on his Bodyguards, and brought out the Haint, so she could fight alongside the Epic Guard.

The two looked a lot alike, and they had a similar fighting style, so they worked well together.

If they needed to, they could merge to increase their power level, but that was unlikely to be necessary now that Karl was at Totem Rank, and the strongest enemies had all diverted to the side of the group, where Rae was attacking.

The Yeti-like Sand Howlers made a wailing noise like the sound of an incoming sand storm. That was how they had gotten their name, but they were also skilled in sand magic, and they were forming their own sandy blizzard to reduce visibility.

Normally, that would also be a deadly area spell. But with the Epic Guard putting [Void Body] on the group, they could simply ignore the damage from the spell and work around the limited sight restrictions.

However, Ophelia was not impressed with this sort of enemy. She would be shaking sand out of her fur for days.

That didn't stop her from fighting, though. The Sand Howlers were an intelligent enemy, and even with Dana's Golems, they were still heavily outnumbered, and the creatures were determined to outflank and encircle them.

Fortunately, Remi had joined their side, and her Bodyguards could hold the back of their formation, while Remi herself was in the middle, throwing Lightning at them.

At least, she was for the first minute, before realizing that Lightning magic didn't work particularly well against these creatures.

Fire didn't either, though not to the same degree of resistance, but water turned them to a soggy mess, and cut through their fur much more effectively than either of the other elemental effects that they had tried so far.

The fur that was so effective at protecting against the lightning and fire elements effectively trapped the water on their bodies, and increased the lingering damage that they were taking.

A victory for Remi.

Chapter 1026: Clearing Sand Howlers

Dana smiled as she watched her golems parry the attacks of the Sand Howlers.

The creatures hadn't landed a single strike on the Golems yet, and the Greater Golems had moved to protect the side opposite Tessa and Thor. But Dana realized there might be a better way to do this.

If she shifted the Golems, who had gained her increased attack speed and auto-parry, she could put the Greater Golems between them, and then both the damage and defensive capabilities would be balanced across the whole section of the battle they were responsible for.

The Sand Howlers weren't particularly fast, and they were large. So, only three of them could engage each Golem at a time.

That was enough that the stone summons were mostly on the defensive. But they were still managing to land a few attacks of their own without relying on Dana. Her newest attack skills were all flower themed for some reason, with names like [Piercing Rose Thorns] and [Plum Blossom Slash]. But they were every bit as powerful as spells with more dignified sorts of names.

If she didn't know better, she would think that the System was messing with her, and giving her skills with names that she would be embarrassed to say out loud.

Nevertheless, they smoothly cut through the thick fur of the Sand Howlers, and every strike left lingering damage from her new poison skill [Toxic Beauty].

She really had been scammed by this Mystic Blademaster class.

The part that annoyed her the most was that it really was as good as she had hoped, and she had even gained the ability to control her [Blade Swarm] skill to the point that she could engage a dozen opponents at a time just with the magical blades.

As she fought, she could feel her mind beginning to expand. Each blade, each summon, was a separate train of thought. And the more that she used them, the more natural it became.

Dana briefly considered that this level of Class might actually be on par with what Karl had if her physique was the same. But as he had Cara on his side, his Antimagic capabilities made him a hard counter to all sorts of mage classes, no matter how powerful.

If he couldn't just nullify her attacks, Dana was certain that she should be a match for nearly any other Overlord.

She activated [Plum Blossom Slash] and sent a wave of razor sharp petals into the Sand Howlers, tearing into them and driving back an attempt to get behind her formation.

"Karl has nearly dealt with the Totems already." Tessa informed the others from her raised vantage point on Thor's back.

Dana laughed, of course he had.

Between Karl and Rae, there was little doubt that they would be able to tear through a ten on two battle as if the enemies were made of paper.

As the number of Sand Howlers dropped, Tessa and Thor moved to herd them into a smaller group, where area skills would do more damage. They had multiple area damage effects, and if they could keep the Sand Howlers close enough, they would all be taking continuous holy damage.

Dana shifted the Golems and her Epic Guard around the other side, encircling the last dozen Sand Howlers in a full reversal of the early part of the fight.

Then, Rae was there, all stabbing limbs and flying blood, and the Sand Howlers were dead.

Rae dipped her front half in what Dana took as a nod of satisfaction, and the spider's army of summoned creatures finally caught up to the battle. None of them could use [Shadow Step], so they had to actually run across the battlefield.

Rae didn't have that much patience.

Karl jogged over and checked the bodies using Soul Sight to ensure there were no survivors faking their death.

"Alright, Hawk has found more targets for us. Did we want to keep going, or does anyone need a rest? It will take about fifteen minutes to get there." Karl asked.

"If we're in the carriage, that's more than enough time to recover." Tessa agreed.

[I need a snack. Fighting makes me hungry.] Thor added in Karl's mind.

"Alright, I will have my Golems pull the carriage, and everyone else can rest. That way we're all fresh for the next fight. There is only one Totem leading the group this time, but there will be a lot more Royal Rank enemies to deal with, instead of Overlords." He explained.

Tessa hopped down and Thor returned to his space to eat.

It was the one inconvenient part of being a behemoth. His appetite was much larger than when he was a Cerro, and his body was still growing rapidly. Thor wasn't quite clear on how large he was going to get, but the name suggested that he would be something close to dragon sized when he was finished.

If he had thought to ask Remi, he would have gotten the full answer. The Impenetrable Bulwark Behemoth never stopped growing. But they got better at reducing their size over time so that they could maintain a more manageable size, and not eat themselves out of a home.

The larger they were, the greater their appetite, and the oldest of the Behemoths dwarfed even the ancient dragons in pure size.

Karl called on a pair of Dire Bears and Rae made them a harness to pull the carriage, which was quite the sight. The two bears harnessed together in a row for more output was overkill, given that they didn't even have trade goods in the carriage.

But it looked impressive, and the spell summoned two of them anyhow.

They started moving across the soft ground, and Karl realized that while they were out of the swamps, the lower areas were still very wet and muddy. That was going to be a problem for travelling, but they could make flotation adapters for the carriage wheels easily enough, and the Totem Ranked bears were capable of simply dragging the carriage through any depth of mud.

As long as the carriage held up to the abuse.

Chapter 1027: More Howlers

The second group was also Sand Howlers, but less powerful ones from the same spawn.

[Hawk, do you see the source of the spawn?] Karl asked.

[I think that it might be gone. Look closely at them, some of these have a lot of old damage on them. I think that they've been out here for months or more.] Hawk replied.

If that was the case, it would make sense that the origin anomaly was long gone.

The changing terrain of the inner regions of Gabil actually explained a lot of the issues that they were having closer to the shore line.

The monsters changed with the changes in terrain, so even if they cleared out all the ones that were coming out, and then went across the whole country in a wave of destruction, as soon as things changed, they would have to start over.

The best that they could hope for was to keep them contained to the central areas.

But there were said to be System Stones, or something equivalent to them, in the middle of the nation, and Karl was hopeful that they might actually manage to find them if they could find the centre of the region that was being altered.

A couple or ten thousand years without maintaining a defensive illusion might be enough to cause this chaos, assuming it was powerful enough.

Opal shook sparkles from her wings in excitement. Yes, that could happen, if you upgraded [Illusionary Domain] to something that would affect the real world.

Her illusionary world could get a bit out of control as it was, since she created beings with an approximation of intelligence and free will. Left unsupervised, they would often do strange things, and she would have to add further instructions to keep them from changing too much.

That was why she didn't put Dwarves in the illusionary world at the Guild House. If she left them unsupervised, they would renovate the whole city, and she would have to either learn the new layout or change it all back.

Both would be chaos for the Guild Members who worked in the area, like the Alchemists.

[The Orcs are coming our way.] Hawk warned when the group was almost to the Sand Howlers.

"We've got incoming Orcs, and a fight. Everyone get ready, they might want to compete." Karl warned.

The Orcs turned toward their group, so Karl altered course to meet them instead of the monsters.

"Well met Chieftain." Karl shouted as the Orcs approached.

"Totem Karl, well met. Are you hunting Sand Howlers for fur blankets?" The largest of the Orcs asked.

"Blankets? No, we have plenty. We're hunting them for fun, and because it makes the Black Dragon happy to bring the monster numbers back to balance."

The Orc laughed at Karl's explanation.

"Well, if that is the case, would you like to have your people and mine compete? We can deal with the Totem, and then our clans can see who gets more pelts."

Karl nodded. "Rae, go collect that Totem's body and bring it back to us, so the others can start their challenge."

The Orc looked confused for a few seconds until Rae reappeared with a decapitated Sand Howler. It had taken all her tricks to ambush that thing, and her Golems had punched a half dozen holes in the front before she cut the head off from behind.

But it worked fast enough to impress the Orcs.

"There aren't more Totems in your group, are there?" The Chieftain asked.

Karl shook his head. "Just the two of us, but we have some powerful Overlords."

The Orc shrugged. Powerful Overlords were good counterparts for his tribe, and his Orcs had many more people. Not more Overlords, but more combatants capable of dealing with Royal Rank Sand Howlers.

The ladies got out of the carriage, and the Chieftain smiled. "Oh, you have a good group. Red, black and green Dragon Priestesses. Though I see that they have all managed to advance their classes. Yes, this should be a good fight."

Then Cara came out to join the fun, and the Orcs began to look confused.

"What is that? It looks like a Void Badger, but with wings." The Chieftain asked.

"She was originally a winged void badger. But she managed to enter an instance and evolved into a Chaos Badger." Karl explained.

The Chieftain nodded slowly. "I suppose there really are things beyond our comprehension in this world. To think that an apex predator could evolve even further.

You have powerful friends, Totem Karl.

A Blood Destruction Spider, that Chaos Badger, a Naga Queen, a Behemoth, multiple dragon clerics, and a Black Dragon, plus a Blademaster."

Then the Orc did a double take. "Oh, I am sorry, Miss Ophelia. I thought that you were another summoned assistant, like the Dire Bears. I didn't notice your name right away."

That was something that Karl realized he really should do. Keeping the System interface active would let him know who around him was illusionary or created by a spell without using Soul Sight.

Soul Sight didn't fail him often, but redundant scouting methods were best.

The Sand Howlers were already running at them, so the Chieftain stopped speaking and motioned for his team to engage.

"Ladies, you're free to engage. Whichever team gets more pelts wins the fight. The three Totems will sit out the fight unless you get in trouble." Karl explained.

Tessa laughed. There were dozens of Orcs here, all eager for a fight. The Sand Howlers were the ones in danger, not them.

But Dana rolled her eyes.

"Always a reason to slack off." She joked.

"I will get started on the setup for the feast after the battle." Karl offered.

"Make plenty of tables. It looks like even the kids want to get in on this challenge." She agreed.

She wasn't joking. Even the Commander Rank Orcs in their teen years were taking out blades and joining teams of more powerful warriors. The only ones remaining behind were the pregnant women and the small children.

Even an ancient looking old shaman woman was hobbling toward the fight with her cane.

Chapter 1028: Surplus Pig Roast

Karl smiled at the Chieftain. "Those must be some good blankets."

"The very finest ones that you can find. Sand Howler fur is resistant to both cold and heat, durable and self-cleaning. If you shake it, everything falls off. It doesn't even hold scents."

Maybe they should keep a few of them, Karl thought.

A few fur blankets would be an acceptable stylistic counterpart to the silk comforters that Rae made. Plus, they could make cloaks out of them, the way that they had with the cut down Frost Giant capes during their early battles.

Rae thought that was a brilliant idea, and began cleaning the Totem so that she could stretch and tan it in her space.

"Did you need the bodies for anything? They don't smell like they would taste good." Karl asked.

The Orc shrugged. "They don't. But we feed them to the livestock, and the bones are good for making tools and such. Waste not, want not."

Karl nodded and gestured to the remains of the one on the ground. "In that case, you can have the rest of that one. We don't have an artisan who specializes in bone art."

The Runecrafters could make items from bone, but they had plenty already, and they were too far from the Guild Store to send items directly there from here.

The Chief nodded in acceptance, then shook his head in dismay as he realized that Hawk had started bombarding the area with Meteors. It had turned the group of Sand Howlers into a war zone, with artillery explosions raining down among them and driving them into the two forces at the edges of their ranks.

Instead of planning a proper attack, the monsters were simply charging at the enemy, trying to escape the deadly rain.

But Hawk hadn't forgotten the assignment. While he was dropping spells on them, he had reduced the temperature of the fire enough that it wouldn't singe the fur. They were supposed to be collecting pelts, so he couldn't destroy them all.

Karl did notice that his meteors weren't the same as Remi's. Hers were actual stones. Hawk's were simply balls of magical energy, like a solid ball of [Rend].

[Hey, look over there. That is a great weapon.] Tian cheered, directing Karl's attention to his left.

One of the Orcs had made a blowgun, and was using it to fire a poison skill at the Sand Howlers. Tian wasn't interested in poison, but that tube would be great for firing stones at enemies.

[I will make you one later, with Runes on it to improve the function. If you fire stones through one like that, it will be just as good as using your skill directly.] Karl informed the little fox.

Karl watched as a Sand Howler leapt over Thor's back, headed for Tessa, who was transformed into her fully scaled Dragonkin form for battle. But the outcome was not what he expected.

Tessa casually swung her shield, shattering the creature's skull and sending the body flying dozens of metres away, without interrupting the skill that she was using with her other hand.

When she had advanced to become a Dragon Crusader, she had gained a skill called Compliance, and it appeared that the physique improvement was no joke.

[Compliance] Creates an area of {Oppression} 10 metres per User Rank, and grants the Dragon Crusader the physique of a Red Dragon at their own Rank.

It would certainly take draconic strength to toss a two hundred kilo Sand Howler like a rag doll.

The Chieftain smiled at Karl. "The women of your Clan are fearsome."

Karl shrugged. "And this is when they are in a good mood."

The Chieftain laughed, and a few of the pregnant women watching the kids snorted in amusement.

A blast of black mist flowed over the battle from Nachtia, who had been fighting in human form, and nearly half of the remaining Sand Howlers simply dropped dead.

The Chief sighed. "It seems to be our loss. There aren't enough of them left for us to catch up. The dragon does not play fair."

He didn't seem to actually be upset by the outcome, but Karl knew that was mostly because the ladies had been well ahead of the Orcs even before Nachtia had used dragon breath.

"Are you just here to hunt monsters for the Black Dragon?" One of the Orcish ladies asked as the last of the Sand Howlers were eliminated.

Karl shook his head. "No, we're also looking for the Great Temple, though it might be known by another name. The location of the lost System Stones. We have reason to think that they might be active again, and able to be found."

The woman excitedly got to her feet. "It is said that there might be a fragment of the lost Dragon Scale there as well. Finding the scale has been the dream of all Orcs for generations beyond record."

Karl smiled. "Indeed it has. I originally come from another continent, where the Orcs relocated to in search of the scale. They believe that they are close to locating it now, but they never gave up on the search."

The woman looked proud of her people's perseverance. It had been thousands of years, but they kept their oath to find the lost scale fragment.

If rumours were to be believed, the whole thing might have been a prank by Supreme Lady Matilda. But Karl strongly suspected that he was actually in possession of the scale fragment. The more energy they poured into the scale that Hawk had recovered from the Capital, the more that it resembled a broken version of the legendary World Dragon Scale that the System's core was formed from.

With the battle ended, the counting began. The outcome was clear, but the precise numbers were important to the record keeping of the Orcs. Whether they won or lost, the combat capability of their tribe, and how it compared to others they met, was vitally important information.

"Now, how do you feel about a pig roast? We have a slight surplus of Royal Rank boars." Karl asked.

[Maybe two. I collected too many of those ones.] Hawk agreed.

"A pig roast sounds wonderful. But we should start setting up the tables we promised before the ladies get back." The Chieftain agreed.

[Tian? Can we get tables and benches, please? Simple stone is fine.]

Chapter 1029: All Events Are Food Events

Tian had enough seating for everyone made in a matter of seconds, along with a large fire pit with a rotating spit for the giant boars that Hawk wanted to get rid of.

"Your people are generous in victory." The Chieftain noted, and Karl chuckled.

"Nobody wants to celebrate a defeat, and we've got good reason to celebrate lately. One of the ladies just made it to the Overlord Rank recently, and soon the others are likely to join her.

If they can keep up that pace, we will be celebrating for a year."

The Chief nodded in agreement. Overlord was an important advancement, as it was so uncommon for most species to make it to Totem Rank. If they could just advance to Totem without any issues, the Orcish Tribes would dominate the region, and not be relegated to Nomads.

"To the North of here, the Trolls are doing the same. They just got a new village chief's successor at Totem Rank a month ago." He explained.

"Are they easy to get along with?" Karl asked.

"As much as Trolls ever are. They are currently led by an aging shaman who remembers the old ways, so we don't have any issues. But the younger generation is different. They have ideas about isolating the tribes from other species.

Even the Orcs don't do that.

Just because we don't trade for things that we can make ourselves doesn't mean that we don't wish to interact with others." The Chief explained.

"If you didn't interact with others, how would you know how strong your kids were? Comparing them only to each other doesn't give you a good measure of their progress." Karl agreed.

"See, you understand. If you don't watch how others are doing, you can fall behind without ever knowing it."

The Orcs and the ladies started to gather as they returned from the battlefield, and Lotus began to show off her advanced food creation skills.

When she got the Nature's Friend Class, she had gotten even better food creation skills, and now she could make wine directly, without waiting for the process. That skill was very popular among the Orcs, who also brewed berry wines of their own.

As she explained it, fermentation was a natural process, and making the ingredients was simple. So, it was only natural that her skills would advance to making wine, mead and other alcohol.

That could become a disaster for many Nature Clerics, with their notorious lack of self-control, but Lotus was never a heavy drinker, and actually preferred the fruit juice to the wine.

But the wine was a big hit among the Orcs, as it went well with roast pork, which was on the spit now, and being helped in the cooking process by a healthy dose of fire magic that increased the temperature of the whole carcass without burning the outside.

They didn't have all night for the food to cook, but the Orcish chefs were good at the trick. They had practiced it all their lives, as the Clan hated to wait for food, and they rarely set up camp long enough before a battle to begin the celebratory feast.

Plus, if they spent all that time cooking, they wouldn't be able to join the fight.

You couldn't leave all the cooking to whoever happened to be injured or pregnant enough that they had to be excluded from the battle.

Some Orcs just couldn't cook.

Tessa added the traditional rice and beans, but spiced heavily, the way that the Orcs and Demons liked it. Now, they had a proper feast.

Unlike many of the Orcs that lived in Drodh, this tribe didn't look like it put much time and effort into decorative or entertainment items. They did have a large drum that they set up for the dance, but that was it.

It was enough, Karl supposed. The Orcs were happy to dance to the beat, as were Lotus and Ophelia. So, it didn't really matter if they were all dancing in their armour.

This really was Lotus' time to shine, Karl decided. She had transformed into the Tree of Life, and was happily dancing along, shaking golden dust from her branches, while the blue healing birds fluttered around the camp, periodically diving into someone to heal hidden injuries.

The Orcs loved the show, as the afternoon sun made the golden dust sparkle, and this tribe was particularly easily entertained.

They were just winding down the party when the ground began to shake, and everyone was suddenly on guard again.

"I don't recognize this. Do you what it is?" Karl asked as the Orcs prepared for battle.

The Chieftain nodded. "This is fairly common. There is something underground in this region, and every so often the ground simply opens up and spits out monsters, then closes again."

That was not how Karl remembered Anomalies working at all.

Could it be the result of anomalies underground?

As Karl recalled, the Dwarves had said that the Anomalies didn't form underground. They had never had one in the Dwarven cities, they always happened on the surface of the Mountains, not inside them.

So, this had to be something else.

Maybe it really was related to the missing System Stones?

It wouldn't shock Karl if it was. Most of the unexplained things in the world were somehow System Related. So, if there was some sort of underground monster spawn trapped here, or perhaps a stable portal underground, it would explain the monsters trying to escape.

Or, they could be in an illusion, and the monsters were actually already there, and just broke through the spell.

Both were possible, but Karl didn't know enough about what was going on in the region to really understand what was simply possible, and what was actually likely.

Hawk was in the air, scouting. But so far, he hadn't seen anything.

[It is shaking the ground, but it isn't shaking the air. Earthquakes should shake the air, I can tell when a hard impact hit the ground nearby.] Hawk complained.

Cara agreed. Earthquakes would shake the air. But when she flew even a single metre high, she couldn't feel any disturbance from the shaking ground, and that wasn't right.

Chapter 1030: Narazir Zone

So, if she could feel it on the ground, but not in the air, in Cara's mind that meant it was likely a trick.

And tricks of magic could be Nullified.

Cara cast [Nullify] and the air seemed to distort for a moment, which encouraged her to recruit assistance.

[Karl, help me out here. I think that we're standing on something good.] She insisted.

The Chieftain recognized the spell right away when Karl started casting. If it didn't work, then there was no harm, but if this strange adventurer could prevent a disaster from occurring near them with a Nullification spell, that would be an even larger cause for celebration.

With both Karl and Cara working, the distortions in the air began to increase, as did the mana load as they worked to overcome the spell.

It was obviously higher level than either of them, but the spell felt unstable. Karl had to continually adjust his Nullification, as parts of the spell would dissolve and reform, like the spell was collapsing on its own, but being maintained by someone on the other side.

Or something.

Finally, the distortion increased to the point that they could clearly see that there was an ancient stone building all around them. That was cause for the Orcs to cheer and begin a new song on the drum.

This song made the distortion in the air even stronger, and the temple clearer. It had to be a form of bardic magic, Karl thought.

Then, the world twisted, and they found themselves standing next to the temple, looking out over fields of long grass filled with domestic animals. They hadn't broken the illusion, they had thrown themselves through it.

"Head Count." Karl and the Chieftain demanded at the same time.

It was quickly determined that everyone was here. Even the summoned bodyguards had been brought along with them.

"I don't think that we moved." One of the Orcish Shamans announced after a few minutes of verification.

"The sun is in the same spot, and will set in the same spot as expected. So, we are near the same latitude, on the same day of the year." He added.

Remi agreed. It was more likely that they had moved through time than space, but she had no way of measuring that.

However, they were not alone.

"Welcome?" A gentle voice asked hesitantly, clearly unsure what to make of the sudden arrivals.

The Chieftain poked Karl, who turned to face the new voice. A young woman in a Darklight Host Tabard stood in front of them, looking nervous.

"Ah, good evening. Sorry about the sudden intrusion, it appears that a magical anomaly decided we should be here today. My name is Karl, and it's a pleasure to meet you, Mira."

Then Karl activated his armour spell to display his Guild Tabard, and the young human woman smiled.

"Normally, I would ask what brings you here today, but if you weren't coming here intentionally, I suppose I will need a new greeting. Welcome to the Narazir Zone way station number 42.

The Temple of the Old Gods does not have any proper clergy in attendance, but we have renovated it to provide lodging for travellers, if you would like to rest for the evening."

It was clear that the Temple would not hold an entire Clan of Orcs, but Karl and the Chieftain, as well as the Shaman, would definitely be interested in checking it out anyhow.

"Would you mind giving us a tour? I suspect that this location might have something to do with our current predicament. Possibly, a magical relic that resonates with one of our members." Karl suggested.

The woman nodded. "Of course. Well, the parts that are accessible. The majority of the basement levels of the temple collapsed long ago, and the location is a historical site, so we didn't try to excavate and renovate them."

The Chieftain smiled, but turned to Karl with a confused look.

{I can't understand her.} He whispered.

That seemed like solid evidence that the System functions were not working properly here. Karl could understand her, but she was human, so they were likely speaking the same language.

But Karl could still understand the Orc, so their own functions weren't impacted.

{She offered us a tour. Just follow my lead, and I will have someone translate.}

In her reduced Spirit Snake form, Remi slithered up Karl's side to his shoulder, giving herself a good perch to see from. If they couldn't understand Orcish, they likely didn't understand Serpent either.

The woman smiled and nodded politely to Remi, recognizing her as a transformed Naga Queen, then gestured toward the temple.

Ophelia gestured for the others to go.

"I will stay here with Thor and the others, you can go ahead with the Priestesses." She explained.

If the locals couldn't speak Orcish, someone needed to stay nearby, or there could be a major incident, simply due to a misunderstanding and lack of translators. The woman at the Temple still had a Darklight Host Guild membership, and a nameplate with the System, so she had a Class. But that only made misunderstandings more dangerous.

The sudden arrival of an entire Orc clan had also attracted attention, and the nearby farmers were watching them with great interest as they went about their days.

Orcs didn't necessarily have the best reputation, thanks to their love of a good fight. So, it wouldn't be out of the question for the locals to think that they might have gotten bored and decided to go raiding.

After all, if the fight didn't come to you, you could go and pick a fight.

But the real question was, where and when had they ended up. There was no temple at this location in either of the versions of the region that they had seen so far.

It was in the zone that Hawk had scouted both before and after the change, so it would certainly have been noticed among the completely wild and uninhabited region. Only, neither of those words described what they were seeing now. This was clearly all farmland of various sorts, and there was a massive stone temple.